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Riverside's Chinatown

by Miranda Olivas

Abstract: The City of Riverside has benefited economically, culturally, socially, and historically through the diverse contributions of Chinese immigrants. In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Chinese immigrants contributed by making Riverside an economic powerhouse through its citrus industry. Riverside's Chinatown, which once was populated and flourished by thousands of Chinese bachelors during harvest season, has been deserted and neglected over the past several decades. The site where Riverside's Chinatown once stood is one of the richest sites of Chinese American artifacts in the United States, yet is currently under threat for being destroyed to make way for new development.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, Euroamerican migrant farmers left Northern California to settle into a region that is now known as Riverside, California with the dream of creating an agriculturally based economy. Riverside's earliest farmers experimented by planting citrus, which proved to be successful. During this time, there was a huge need in California for cheap agriculture laborers. Chinese immigrants already had an impact on the economy in surrounding areas, including San Bernardino County, through their contribution of the building of railroads. The farmers, knowing the Chinese had experience with producing and handling orange and lemon crops, appealed to Chinese immigrants with the prospects of economic opportunity through jobs in the citrus groves.

Beginning in 1879, Chinese men emigrated from Southern China's Guangdong region for economic opportunity. These men were attracted to California with the prospect of being employed as gold miners, workers on the transcontinental railroad, and as agricultural laborers. Southern Chinese laborers were sought out specifically because they had centuries' worth of knowledge on how to cultivate citrus. Riverside's Chinese pioneers worked within farming communities in jobs such as fruit pickers, gardeners, ranch foremen, housekeepers, merchants, small and large-scale tenant farmers, and even small business owners.¹ They found comfort away from home by setting up their residence within ethnic neighborhoods; this helped to maintain their Chinese culture. For a brief period, Riverside's Chinese population was second largest to the state (exceeded by San Francisco).²

Riverside's first Chinatown was referred to by the local community as the Chinese Quarter and was located in downtown

¹ Riverside's Save Our Chinatown Committee, "Proposed Signature Park to Preserve Riverside's Historic Chinatown" Newcastle: Dangermond Group, nd, 2.

² Rebecca L. Lum and Suanne J. Yamashita, "Chinese Who Died in Riverside, California: 1886-1939," unpublished research paper, University of California Riverside, Sociology 190, Professor Edna Bonacich, Summer 1984, 3.

Riverside. Following the American Civil War, the nation's economy was in a depression. Limited economic opportunities and job competition fueled racial tension between Americans and Chinese laborers.³ In 1882, the federal government introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act which put caps on the number and social class of immigrants from China and justified local hatred toward the Chinese population in the United States. On the local level, this law had direct consequences for Chinese immigrants living in Riverside. In 1885, when the Chinese Quarter caught on fire, the residents were pushed to relocate their second Chinatown to the outskirts of town, which would become known as Riverside's second Chinatown. In 1893, Riverside's Chinatown caught on fire, resulting in what became known as The Great Chinatown Fire. The settlement was rebuilt and continued to thrive for several years. As decades passed, the Chinatown population diminished after several of the bachelors returned home to China due to heavy anti-Chinese sentiment. Others stayed in California, but relocated to other surrounding counties such as Los Angeles and Orange County.

Today, the historic Chinatown is no longer visible above ground. The Great Chinatown Fire of 1893, pushed artifacts into wooden cellar pits. Chinatown residents at the time rebuilt brick buildings on top of the original foundation and artifacts. In 1974, the buildings that were constructed after the fire were demolished by the City of Riverside for safety reasons. Riverside's Chinatown is believed to be the richest undeveloped archaeological site of artifacts of Chinese immigrants within Southern California. Preserving the history of Chinese immigrants to Riverside County from 1879-1920 is important in understanding how the region has developed into what it is day.

Chinese Immigration to California

Ancient Chinese Confucian doctrine favored staying in one place, remaining tied to the motherland and the graves of one's ancestors.

³ Riverside Municipal Museum Press, 3.

It is considered an embarrassment when citizens left their homeland. In the nineteenth century, a series of crises caused the Chinese population to flee abroad. During the rule of the Qing dynasty, China underwent both foreign and domestic conflicts. This conflict weakened government, led to food shortages, the Opium War (1839-1842), and the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1865). It was during this time of discontent and strife that many Chinese citizens immigrated to the United States. “This enormous ‘push,’ coupled with the ‘pull’ of California’s Gold Rush, proved an almost irresistible force drawing impoverished peasants, merchants, and speculators from China to ‘Gold Mountain,’ the Chinese term for California.”⁴ As the California Gold Rush frenzy declined in 1863, the Chinese went from working in the gold mines to the strenuous work of clearing mountain terrain in the High Sierras and setting train tracks across the country to build the transcontinental railroad. When the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, thousands of Chinese laborers were left unemployed.⁵

As Californians developed citrus crops, that required intensive labor, the demand for a skilled work force increased. This demand encouraged emigration of white Americans from the eastern side of the United States to Southern California.⁶ Chinese immigrants were willing and able to do the job. The immigrants from the Guangdong region possessed a century’s worth of knowledge of farming in southeastern China with orchard and truck gardening skills, citrus propagation, irrigation, pest control, and citrus and packing techniques.⁷ This resulted in a large number of Chinese to migrate to Southern California’s “Citrus Belt” in Riverside and San Bernardino in the late 1870s. Orange growers viewed the Chinese traveling from Northern California as an

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ The Great Basin Foundation, ed., *Wong Ho Leun: An American Chinatown, Volume 1: History* (San Diego: The Great Basin Foundation, 1987), 2.

⁷ Lai and Choy, 61; Riverside Municipal Museum Press, 4; Riverside Save Our Chinatown Committee, 7.

unexpected blessing because they replaced low quantity of Native American pickers as well.⁸

By the year 1900, the United States' Census showed that the city of Riverside had the highest per capita income in the entire country, a main reason being the contribution of the Chinese immigrants and their knowledge of citrus cultivation. The Chinese workers provided all the labor in Riverside's first thirty years in the citrus industry that made the city an economic powerhouse.⁹

Riverside's First Chinatown, 1879-1886

In late nineteenth century, Dr. James P. Greves, a rancher from Northern California purchased land in Riverside, California with the hopes of out-producing Southern China in its production of opium. In the years to follow, Greves failed in his goals and ultimately he withdrew from the opium market.¹⁰ Although his opium crops failed, it placed Riverside, California on the map as an agricultural hub. In the years to come, citrus groves proved to be a successful crop in the area.

In the 1880s, the Chinese immigrants gained a reputation as excellent budders and grafters from their techniques practiced in China. Soon, the Chinese were replacing the Native American pickers in Riverside's orange groves.¹¹ By 1879, Chinese laborers, ranging in age from eighteen to sixty years old, moved to Riverside to work in the citrus groves.¹² Riverside specifically attracted unwed males in large part because manual laborers were in high demand and these men were not tied down with familial commitments.¹³ Most of the Chinese immigrants in the Riverside

⁸ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 194.

⁹ Kevin Akin, "This Place Matters" radio interview, California State University San Bernardino, recorded in Spring 2014.

¹⁰ Harry Lawton, "Orange Groves and Rice Bowls: A Narrative History of the Chinese Pioneers of Riverside, California (1969-1974)," research manuscript, 1986-1987, 15.

¹¹ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 2.

¹² Lawton, 23.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

area came from the regions around Canton Delta, in particular the Gom-Benn village.¹⁴

For a place to rest and socialize after a hard day's work, Riverside's Chinese laborers established their ethnic quarter between Eighth and Ninth street, and Main and Orange street. The Chinese quarter was made up of ten buildings, all wooden structures, that housed tents for the day laborers, and was also composed of small shacks with as many as twelve men sleeping in bunk beds that were stacked from floor to ceiling. By 1885, several hundred Chinese laborers were living in this settlement.¹⁵

Chinese immigrants thrived in Riverside. They made significant contributions to the local economy and attracted both Euroamerican and Chinese consumers. For example, the "Quong Mow Lung Company" store, once located on Ninth street, became a prominent supplier of general merchandise which attracted members of the Euro-American community. The company also advertised "Chinese and Japanese Nick Nacks for the Holidays" to market to non-Chinese consumers. This same store sold a variety of goods that attracted Chinese consumers as well. The store sold foods such as roasted pork, roasted ducks, Chinese vermicelli, dried fish and seaweed, peanut oil, and Chinese candies; as well as clothing, cooking utensils, ceramic ware, Chinese slippers, and herbs and medicines. In addition, some of the Riverside general stores served as gambling parlors and opium dens.

Chinese immigrants served in diverse positions such as house servants, packinghouse employees, cooks, barbers, railroad workers, restaurant owners, ranchers, and vegetable farmers and truck farmers. Of all of these businesses one of the most competitive ones was the laundry washhouses.¹⁶

In 1878, the Hang Wo Laundry washhouse was the first Chinese business to market a service using traditional Chinese

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Patricia Riddell and Lesley Bacha, "Riverside's Chinatown: A Study of the Past," University of California, Riverside, 1974, History 260, Dr. Tobey, 1974.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

methods that pleased the residence of Riverside.¹⁷ The most successful washhouse was the Duey Wo Lung Company which was established in 1882. The owner, Chen Duey Wo, also became known as the unofficial mayor/spokesperson of the first Chinatown. Rumors spread throughout Riverside that the Duet Wo Lung Company was so successful that it forced a white owned laundry company to close permanently.¹⁸ This fueled tensions between the Chinese community and Euroamerican community in Riverside.

Riverside Chinese washhouses each employed about five workers, since house-to-house deliveries were part of their service. It is estimated that about thirty Chinese laundry men were employed in Riverside. In the late nineteenth century, the laundry industry was dominated by Chinese business owners.¹⁹ The typical laundry had several rooms, which contained areas for hot water kettles, ironing, and handling business.²⁰ In 1882, Riverside had several Chinese washhouses located in the Chinese Quarter.

Anna Rice Bordwell arrived in Riverside in 1880. Bordwell explained the traditional methods of washing clothes that the Chinese would use in washhouses. She described the Chinese laundrymen as wearing "broad-brimmed straw peasant hats, white wide-legged trousers and cotton blouses, and sandals industriously pounding the town's wash on rocks and starching clothes so stiff that 'generally they would stand alone.'"²¹ She also explained that "the laundrymen soaped and washed customers' clothes in a lateral irrigation ditch running along Seventh Street. Clothes were then pounded flat on rock slabs of the banks of the irrigation ditch, hung up to dry over Chinese sleeping bunks in the washhouses, and finally starched and ironed."²² The Chinese launderers and other

¹⁷ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 6.

¹⁸ Riddell and Bacha, 10.

¹⁹ Riverside Municipal Museum Press, 5.

²⁰ Paul C. Sui, "The Chinese Laundryman," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1953).

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 7.

careless merchants dumped their dirty water into cesspools beneath building or into irrigation ditches running alongside downtown Riverside. This caused a terrible stench, potential health hazards, and a pollution problem. Despite the fact that both Euroamericans and Chinese laborers contributed to this problem, Riverside's residents blamed Chinese laborers solely for this situation.²³

First Attempts Of Removing Chinese From Downtown Riverside

The Chinese population of Riverside lived with "sojourner" intentions, that is to say that they always viewed their time in the United States as a temporary move and that they would eventually return home to China. Because of this, they lived in temporary shelters and saved as much money as possible. Many Americans were critical of their standard of living. This helped to fuel anti-Chinese sentiment.²⁴

The other early source of conflict between Euroamericans and the Chinese population in Riverside was the fact that Chinese immigrants were not interested in assimilating into American culture.²⁵ For instance, Chinese men wore queue hairstyles which were a symbol of the submission to the Manchu government in China. Removal of the queue could cause serious penalties for Chinese men upon arrival back to China. Therefore many chose to keep this hairstyle even in the United States.²⁶

In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, as a means to limit Chinese immigration to the United States. By 1892, the Geary Act banned immigration for China to the United States for ten years. Also under the Geary Act, Chinese immigrants that already lived in America were required to carry residence certificates on the penalty of deportation.²⁷

²³ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁴ Riddell and Bacha, 13.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 219.

²⁷ Lucy E. Salyer Laws, *Harsh as Tigers* (Chapel Hill & London: University of

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The first attempt to forcibly remove the Chinese quarter from Riverside's downtown area occurred in 1878. The Chinese men who settled in the Chinese Quarter became subject to harassment, were jailed and eventually forced out of downtown Riverside in an effort to develop this area to accommodate the business interests of prominent Euroamericans.²⁸

By the late 1880s, Riverside was a thriving city due to its citrus industry. Luther M. Holt, a promoter for large land development companies and Secretary of the Southern California Horticultural Society encouraged citrus industry in a Riverside. However, Holt was uncomfortable with Chinese culture. He wrote: "The Chinese appear to have everything their own way. They sell whisky and gamble and disturb the peace generally. The law appears to be powerless to protect our people from this curse. If everything else fails, Riverside must do what Eureka did, drive the Chinamen out and tear down their filthy quarters."²⁹

Between the years of 1882 and 1885, Holt, also an editor for the Riverside newspaper, published editorial campaigns to "Renovate Chinatown." In the editorial he claimed that the Riverside Chinatown was "breeding disease in the very heart of town," and he was able to persuade a small amount of his readers to boycott Chinese vegetables.³⁰ The Chinese vegetable boycott was unsuccessful to the mass public because in an era of no refrigeration, the Chinese home delivery of vegetables was a convenience to the Riverside housewives and residents who were unskilled at growing their own crops.³¹

Local newspapers and businesses also started to advocate a white-owned steam laundry company named Riverside Steam Laundry. This company promised customers that their laundry would be returned "in finer shape than if manipulated by the best

North Carolina Press, 1995), 95.

²⁸ Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 44.

²⁹ Ibid., 6.

³⁰ Ibid., 44.

³¹ Lawton, 63.

heathen Chinese this side of the Rockies.”³² Their marketing did not work and the white-owned laundry failed because customers preferred the Chinese prices and quality of service.³³

“Ordinances were passed that prohibited anymore wooden buildings in the downtown area [specifically in the Chinese Quarter] and allowed present ones to be condemned by the health officer. Finally, pressure was put on all land owners of the block to raise their rents to five hundred dollars per month, payable in advance.”³⁴ This pushed the Chinese to realize that they needed to relocate their property to the outskirts of downtown Riverside, which they believed would be secure from future harassments.³⁵

In most cases, non-Chinese Riverside residents were not enthusiastic over having the Chinese leave the downtown area, in large part because they relied on the Chinese community for economic purposes.³⁶ Some thought the Chinese had good work ethics because they were willing to work long hours a day and seven days a week. Even though many Riverside residents thought poorly of the Chinese inability to assimilate into American culture, many people in Riverside were interested in traditional Chinese culture including the Chinese New Year festival, which was one of the most popular annual events in Riverside. Some Euroamerican women also enjoyed wearing Chinese gowns at their tea parties.

Even though the Chinese were not discriminated against by all of Riverside, the Chinese residents were still insistent in moving locations. In between moving locations of the Chinese quarter, the settlement was set on fire. An unknown person saturated boards and boxes with kerosene in front of the Blue Front grocery store, a wooden building, in the Chinese Quarter.³⁷ It is believed that the fire was set by the immigrants themselves as a

³² Ibid., 45.

³³ Ibid., 9.

³⁴ Riddell, and Bacha, 5.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 20.

³⁷ Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 47.

sign of retaliation for the unjust treatment they had endured.³⁸ “The first attempt at a fire department [in Riverside] came when Chinatown [caught fire]...everybody got buckets and tubs from the hardware store and threw water in the flames till they got tired. After [this had failed they] sat down and watched Chinatown burn...Such a statement seems to hint at the feelings of the Riversiders for the Chinese.”³⁹ The Chinese were more than ready to move away from the hostility and start a life with the freedom to embrace their culture at the new Chinatown.

Riverside's Second Chinatown, 1886-1930

In 1885, Wong Nim, Wong Gee, and Chen Wo Duey negotiated an agreement to establish a Chinatown on a seven acre site that a couple owned in the Tesquesquite Arroyo, southwest of downtown Riverside, under the company name “Quong Nim and Company.” The company purchased the land on the corner of Brockton and Tesquesquite Avenues for ten thousand dollars and agreed to pay the couple’s remaining mortgage of \$3,000. Wong Nim assisted Wong Gee and Chen Duey Wo in purchasing the land because he was the only one of the three to be born an American citizen. Wong Nim had also been a successful business owner and “founding-father” of San Bernardino’s Chinatown.⁴⁰ The company then hired contractor A.G. Boggs to erect some buildings in the new Chinatown.⁴¹ The company also made sure that their new Chinatown settlement followed the ancient principles of *feng-shui*, a Chinese ancient art and science that was used to orient buildings based on spiritual energies and harmony. In surveying the land, they paid close attention to the property’s relationship to the

³⁸ Riddell, and Bacha, 6.

³⁹ S.C. Evans, “Riverside Museum Associations Newsletter” (April-May 1974), 2.

⁴⁰ Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 50.

⁴¹ Harry W. Lawton, “Riverside’s Pioneer Chinese: Part One: Only A Few Graves and A Crumbling Brick Building Link Hazy Era To Present,” *Press Enterprise*, February 9, 1959 [or 1958].

geographical landmarks as the nearby Santa Ana River, Mount Rubidoux, and the adjacent upper canal.⁴² Being near a canal brought good *ch'i* and the mountain protected them from evil influences.⁴³ For more than twenty-years, Chen Duey Wo took the role as the “mayor” of Chinatown. There are numerous stories found in Riverside’s newspapers that speak of his competence as a Chinatown leader. During earlier demonstrations of anti-Chinese sentiment, Chen Wo Duey served as a force of moderation and discipline.⁴⁴

By 1892, Chinatown was made up of twenty-six wooden buildings, half of which were shops and laundries. There were two tall dovecotes mounted on four-legs above the Chinatown shops. The settlement reflected the Gom-Benn village from the Guangdong Province, “a community of dingy frame buildings and mysterious smells, a complex of shops and lodging houses with colorful signs above the doorways, varnished ducks, rattan baskets and cuttlefish swinging from wooden beams.”⁴⁵ The streets were populated with laundry boys, orange packinghouse workers, vegetable handcarts and wagons, shopkeepers haggling customers, and local housewives seeking house servants. Popular Chinatown shops included “Bow Lung’s Restaurant,” where one might eat abalone, bird’s nest soup, or shark fins scrambled with ham and eggs. “Wong’s Barber Shop,” where Chinese immigrants got their queue haircut maintained, and “Tuck Sing Lung Co.,” an employment agency that also sold valuable articles from Japan and China.⁴⁶

The following year, in 1893, the Great Chinatown Fire destroyed much of the community. According to one of the inhabitants interviewed by a *Daily Press* reporter, the fire was

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The Great Basin Foundation, *Wong Ho Leun: An American Chinatown, Volume 2: Archeology* (San Diego: The Great Basin Foundation, 1987), 14.

⁴⁴ Lawton.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

started in one of the kitchens.⁴⁷ Only one of the eight buildings remained. Chen Duey Wo who had leased the buildings estimated losses ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000 per merchant. In reconstructing the community, the main street was narrowed and wooden buildings were rebuilt with bricks.⁴⁸ For more than forty years, until its gradual decline in the 1920s, Chinatown had thrived and remained a significant community in Riverside.

Money Transfers and Communicating Back Home

The Chinese banking system provided immigrants with a variety of services. The Chinese immigrants were known for their frugality. Money was saved from their wages and regularly sent back to China. It was estimated that the Riverside Chinese immigrants had sent hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.⁴⁹ A prominent remittance banker who served all of the Inland Empire was Wong Sai Chee. Wong, a native of Gomm-Benn, arrived in Riverside in 1890. Wong owned Sing Kee Company, which operated from 1894-1930, served as a general merchandise store, laundry, café, and specialized in money transfers. His company had thousands of clients across the inland region, and was located on the eastern side. Wong was also arrested in 1921 for running a lottery in Riverside. It was rumored that he failed to pay the customary bribe to the police.⁵⁰

His remittance banking service directed money and mail from the United States to rural locations in Southeastern China. The Riverside Chinese immigrant community relied heavily on this system to send money and remain in contact with their loved ones at home. Wong had the only banking system that serviced Gomm-Benn and its surrounding areas where there was not a door-to-door post office system. It also made it easier since most Chinese immigrants could not write addresses in foreign languages for

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Riddell and Bacha, 22; The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 51.

⁴⁹ Lawton.

⁵⁰ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 329.

international mailing. Wong's profitable business eventually allowed him return home in 1930.⁵¹

Religion

Chinatown's last resident, George Wong, explained that "in China every village had its own god. The first person to die became the one who watched over the village and kept the evil spirits away."⁵² The immigrants of Riverside Chinatown brought their religious beliefs with them. In 1900, Chinatown constructed the "Chee Kung Tong Temple," also known as a Joss House, which was located on the street that American mapmakers named "Mongol Avenue;" known by residents as "The Avenue." The temple's shrine was dedicated to Kuan Kung, who was a general of the Shu Han dynasty (210-280 A.D.) and was worshipped as the guardian of courage, loyalty, and commitment. The Chee Kung Tong shrine was popular amongst the merchant class and non-Chinese visitors. The temple was painted bright red. Besides being a place for prayer, the temple also served as a meeting hall and a place for celebrations where residents viewed dragon parades and concerts. Walter Chung, whose father owned a small farm near Riverside's Chinatown from 1917-1919, recalled that at the Chee Kung Tong Temple, "Chinese would go there and burn incense to those who have departed and their relatives, and they would leave food and incense burning on a cut watermelon."⁵³

The Chee Kung Tong Shrine was not the only site that was spiritually significant in the settlement. Rose (Wong) Ung, a daughter of a Riverside Chinese merchant recalled that in her childhood home, her family had a Buddha shrine with incense and fruit offerings.⁵⁴ Even though the Chinese continued to practice their religious customs, some Riverside residents persecuted them

⁵¹ Riverside Municipal Museum Press, 11; The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 331.

⁵² The Great Basin Foundation, Vol 2, 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

for being bad influences because of the practice of gambling and smoking opium.

Gambling and Opium

In the limited excavations of Riverside's Chinatown in 1984-1985, over 400 items of opium paraphernalia were found, making it the largest collection of opium found on a site. These items were mostly pieces of pipe bowls, smoking lamps, opium needles, and pipe fittings.⁵⁵ The 1886 *Riverside Press and Horticulturist* published an article titled "Opium Joints" that alleged some of Riverside's prominent young men and women visited opium dens while dropping off their laundry.⁵⁶ The Chinese immigrants were being blamed for corrupting the youth's morality. "The threat of opium dens to virtuous Euroamerican youth was a rallying point for the anti-Chinese sentiment."⁵⁷

Along with smoking opium, gambling was also a common practice among some Chinese immigrant men. It served as a leisure activity that took away some of the depression of living in a distant foreign land, being away from families, and the stress of working twelve hour shifts.⁵⁸ Some of the Chinese men partook in illegal gambling in general merchandise stores and laundry washhouses while one man would serve as look out for the police.⁵⁹ One of the games played during this time was called Fan-Tan. It was a game of chance where the winner had to guess whether the amount of coins on the middle of a table was an odd or even number. Other popular games were Pi-Gow (a domino game) and playing the lottery.

These types of gambling were also popular with the non-Chinese community. A high number of white Riverside residents would come to Chinatown and buy a lottery ticket. Lottery tickets

⁵⁵ Ibid., 317.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 239.

⁵⁷ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 239.

⁵⁸ Lawton, 59.

⁵⁹ Riddell and Bacha, 11.

contained eighty Chinese characters or ten lines of eight words taken from the Chinese poem, “See Tsz King,” a one-thousand line poem with no repetitive characters. There was a drawing that pulled twenty characters and if a player had five of these, he won back his bid. If a player had more than five characters, the profit would go up several thousand times from the original bid. If players were caught in a police raid and the profits were high enough, the police would sometimes “turn a blind eye” and take the money with them.⁶⁰ Many Riverside residents participated in the Chinese lotteries and some tried to prevent the Chinese immigrants from getting caught in police raids. Eventually, the police prohibited any whites from participating in the Chinese lotteries.⁶¹

The Fight For Preserving This Site

By the 1920s, Riverside’s Chinese immigrant population started to diminish for several reasons. The federal Chinese Exclusion Act caused limited population growth. Some Chinese immigrants moved to bigger areas in Los Angeles and Orange County, and many returned home to China. Since the community was made up primarily of Chinese bachelors, it was easier to simply pack up and relocate. The lack of familial ties to the community meant that there was little incentive of any potential direct descendants of Chinese immigrants to protect the heritage of Chinatown. Some also argue that the arrival of 300,000 Mexican immigrants in the fields and packinghouses during the time caused many Chinese to be out of work through job competition.⁶²

In 1941, George Wong, who had arrived in Riverside from China in 1914, acquired the property title of Wong Nim’s Chinatown. Wong had already owned part of the property that was given to him by Chen Duey Wo. He became the caretaker and was the last resident of Riverside’s Chinatown. Wong became a

⁶⁰ The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 239.

⁶¹ Riddell and Bacha, 12.

⁶² The Great Basin Foundation, Vol. 1, 306.

prominent figure in Chinatown and Riverside at large. He took care of his elderly neighbors and ran his restaurant "Bamboo Gardens." He was open to sharing stories and showing artifacts from Chinatown's heyday. Wong saved "old signs that once hung above Chinatown shops [and he] kept an ancient Chinese herbal cabinet, once used by Chinatown's doctors" as well as other relics like porcelain vases, teak chairs, the handbell of the Chinese vegetable vendors, and ancient tools.⁶³ Throughout Wong's life, the legacy of Chinatown remained alive.

Wong passed away in 1974 and was buried at Evergreen Cemetery, right next to Chinatown. At the time of his death, Riverside showed little interest in preserving the site and its historical artifacts. Most of the items were sold at auction to private collections, but only a few were kept in possession at the Riverside Municipal Museum. As the years passed, Chinatown's buildings were demolished for safety reasons and the historical value was in jeopardy. In 1976, the city of Riverside designated the site as a Cultural Heritage Landmark due to the archeological significance that Chinatown represented, since it was the only site in California that had an entire Chinese commercial and residential community.⁶⁴ The Great Chinatown Fire in 1893, left much debris that was pushed into the cellar pits of the wooden buildings. The debris from the fire contained many artifacts. After the fire, brick buildings were built on top of the debris. The demolition of 1974 pushed Chinatown's remains further underground.

The fight to preserve the site has been active since the 1980's, with people like Eugene Moy, Director at Large of Save Our Chinatown Committee and member of the Riverside Chinese Culture Preservation Committee, that when the Riverside County Board of Education proposed to construct a warehouse on the land, political lobbying had to be pursued. With the support of the city and county of Riverside, the Riverside Cultural Heritage Board allowed a limited archeological dig of the site between 1984 and

⁶³ Ibid., 309.

⁶⁴ "Asian Pacific Heritage Month: Chinatown," National Park Service, accessed December 11, 2014, <http://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/asia/2006/chi.htm>.

1985. The dig uncovered several thousand artifacts such as chinaware, currency, and drug paraphernalia. This proved that a significant trade of culture existed between China and Riverside during the Chinese immigration boom of the late 19th century.

After learning about the findings of the limited dig, the Riverside County Board of Education agreed to construct their building on the western end of the Chinatown property, away from the original Chinatown buildings. The Board of Education and the County Parks Department then showed intentions of developing the land into a legitimate Chinatown Heritage Park for the community and visitors. The city submitted an application to designate the site for the National Register of Historic Places, and the Board of Education adopted a minute order to preserve the site. By the 1990s, a mix between poor communication and lack of secure long-time finances between city, county, and school officials obstructed the process of creating a park from being completed. The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, among others, were in favor of the preservation and assumed that the site and archeology would remain safe and untouched. To date, the site is owned and maintained by the Board of Education.

In 2008, business developer, Doug Jacobs, gave an offer to the Riverside Board of Education to purchase the land for a large sum of money, and has since been fighting for his right to own the land. Jacobs intended to build a 65,281 square foot medical office. An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) was given to his company as part of the city approval process for the proposed Jacobs Medical Office Building on the Chinatown site. If the land were to be sold to Jacobs, the site's archaeological remains would be destroyed through construction. Moy described how this caused the formation of the Riverside Chinese Culture Preservation Committee (RCCPC). In this committee, members discussed how to negotiate between the developer and the City toward an alternative to the imminent destruction of the site. Moy explained that the Preservation Committee's objective, "comments were sent in response to the draft EIR, and recommendations were made for the proper and professional recovery of archaeology, curation of

artifacts, and the interpretation and display of the history. A fiscal commitment from the developer was requested/demanded. The Riverside City Council members responded by finalizing the EIR with what some in the RCCPC felt were inadequate terms and conditions for the developer. The EIR was certified by the city council at a public hearing in late 2008. The city council adopted a Statement of Overriding Considerations, which asserted the project was approved, despite the significant impact to a historic resource, based on the economic benefits of the medical office project.”⁶⁵

It was because of this lost battle, many Preservation Committee members felt defeated and chose to leave the committee. It was after this that the Save Our Chinatown Committee quickly formed. The Save Our Chinatown Committee is a small 501c3 non-profit organization dedicated to preserve Riverside's Chinatown site for current and future generations. The Save Our Chinatown Committee had been heavily involved with not allowing the developer to build on the property, and to see the development of the site into a Signature Heritage Park. They have battled in court with local politicians many times to preserve the site. Committee members have advocated for the developer to build his medical building in an alternative location in Riverside.

In 2012, efforts from committee members were not taken into consideration from a panel of judges. The court also found that the new EIR contained insufficient analysis for the city to consider the severity of the environmental and cultural impacts of the proposed development. The committee sought advice from Pete Dangermond, former Riverside County Park Director and retired California State Park Director. Dangermond had a background of consulting on the development of regional parks in the Riverside County area. The committee entered into a contract with Mr. Dangermond. They also worked with a University of Southern California graduate student in landscape architecture to produce a site concept and brochure that described the vision for the park.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Eugene Moy, Interview, March 22 2015.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

With a concrete vision of the park, the committee worked equally as hard to bring awareness to Riverside mayor, Rusty Bailey, and city councilmen, Mike Gardner, Chris Mac Arthur, and Steve Adams. The committee and Dangermond reached out to historians, archaeologists, students, community leaders, activists, and locals to support an alternative site for the medical office. In 2014, Councilman Gardner, whose district inhabits Chinatown, suggested the City Council members sell another piece of land to the developer for the medical office development. The alternative site is located a few blocks away from Riverside's Chinatown. The developer accepted Gardner's pitch and Jacobs purchased the land.⁶⁷

More recently, in March 2015, the City's Development Committee, comprised of three of the seven Riverside City Council members, unanimously approved the recommendation to have the City study the feasibility, cost, and funding options for a park.⁶⁸ Currently, the committee members will work with Riverside city staff to work on the feasibility report. Moy stated, "We're still a ways from full approval of the park...The park will probably be accomplished in phases, as funds become available. The first priority will be to stabilize the area of archaeological sensitivity, the interim landscaping and maybe interpretive exhibits. Then, the final interpretive and community center."⁶⁹

The Save Our Chinatown committee members are committed to honor the contributions of Riverside's Chinese immigrants in the early infrastructure and economy of Riverside. The committee members do not want to remove the artifacts that exist underground, instead they want to safely lay a foundation for a park on top of the property. They have proposed to transform the

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Save Our Chinatown Committee: Preserving Chinese American Heritage in Riverside, California. "About Chinatown," last updated February 12, 2015, <http://www.saveourchinatown.org/aboutchinatown.html>; Suzanne Hurt, "Riverside: Chinatown Park Moves One Step Closer," *The Press Enterprise*, March 20, 2015, <http://www.pe.com/articles/site-762790-city-park.html>.

⁶⁹ Moy.

property into a heritage park that would “help residents and visitors better understand and appreciate the role of Chinese workers had in building the early infrastructure of [Riverside], region, and state, while providing a community-service amenity.”⁷⁰ The ultimate goals of the park include a visitor center, a bookstore, a reconstruction of the Chinatown’s water tower, a Chinese garden, and citrus plants planted as a symbol of the story of Riverside’s early Chinese immigrants. However, the threat to the preservation of Chinatown continues, since there is not a full approval from all Riverside city council members for the security of a Signature Heritage Park. In a radio interview conducted by California State University, San Bernardino students, Save Our Chinatown Committee officer, Kevin Akin, strongly believes that this site can be saved with more individuals coming together in popular support. He argues that the people of Riverside want it to be saved, so the bigger the support, the higher the chance city officials will approve a heritage park.⁷¹

Although the original Riverside Chinatown is gone, there is still a way to honor the legacy of the Chinese immigrants and their contributions through a memorial park. It can exist as a symbol, and as a way for future generations to remember the history and legacy of their city. Furthermore it will symbolize the contributions to not only the history of Riverside, but to the history of California as well. Save Our Chinatown Committee Director at Large, Margie Akin, expressed that “thousands of Chinese lived in Riverside, to turn it into a building property isn’t right.”⁷² It is important to bring awareness to the contributions of these early Chinese immigrants in the history of Riverside, and the inland region of Southern California. Chinese immigrants of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century directly contributed to the development of the fishing and lumber industry, laid tracks for the transcontinental railroad, and were vital in the agricultural industry. Riverside’s

⁷⁰ Proposal to Preserve Riverside’s Chinatown, 15.

⁷¹ Kevin Akin, radio interview, California State University, San Bernardino, Spring 2014.

⁷² Ibid.

Chinatown deserves to be preserved for current and future generations before another immigration story is lost.

Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, Riverside was developed with the intentions of being a lush farm town. After many failed crops, farmers decided to give citrus a try. Growers discovered Southern Chinese workers were skilled at citrus growing because of their home in Guangdong, where citrus cultivation had been practiced for hundreds of years. These immigrants showed growers how to propagate, irrigate, and ship citrus. They were able to share their knowledge about citrus to growers, which allowed Riverside to become one of the nation's economic powerhouse at the time.⁷³

Southern California Chinese immigration history is an unknown story to many. The settlement was important then, but it became a forgotten memory. Today, Riverside's Chinatown is the only remaining archeological site in the region of Riverside that has not been destroyed or been built over. To be acknowledged of the historical meaning of this property makes the land special, and the land needs to be handled with care. The City of Riverside's growth and success today from the citrus industry came from the hard work of the Chinese immigrant labor force.

⁷³ Margie Akin, radio interview, California State University, San Bernardino, Spring 2014.

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Author Bio

Miranda Olivas graduated from the California State University, San Bernardino in 2014. She first studied Chinese-American immigration history in Dr. Cherstin Lyon's "Immigration and Ethnic American History" course. In Miranda's senior year, she enrolled in Dr. Lyon's "Introduction to Oral History" course, where she participated in a collaborative project with Riverside's "Save Our Chinatown Committee" to preserve Riverside's Chinatown by collecting individuals' personal memories and committee members' stories of the historical landmark. These stories were then broadcast on CSUSB's Coyote Radio Station. Miranda has been a life-long resident of Riverside and has been committed to continuing the city's legacy of being committed to embracing education, community, and cultural history. She has felt that it is especially imperative to continue raise awareness of the city's historic Chinatown. Upon graduating from CSUSB, Miranda has continued her work with the Save Our Chinatown Committee at the National Archives and Records Administration building, where she has been working to catalog Chinese immigration documents that specifically pertain to Riverside and San Bernardino County. Miranda plans to continue her education by pursuing a degree in Special Education.

